

Public Health column for Independent Record**October 2016****Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 406-457-8910****Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908****Sleep Tight, Little One, And Sleep Safe****By Melanie Reynolds
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Twice a year, a group of local people gets together for what must be one of the grimmest meetings imaginable.

They're experts in the fields of health, social services, law enforcement, and related disciplines, and they're known collectively as the Fetal, Infant, Child and Maternal Mortality Review (FICMMR) team. Their unenviable job is to review the circumstances surrounding every death of a child from Lewis and Clark County.

The purpose of the FICMMR team is not to assign blame for these heartbreaking deaths. Rather, it's to look for patterns or trends among them in the hope that the team can identify ways to prevent similar tragedies in the future. They work in strict confidentiality.

From a public health perspective, the death of an infant or child can be a measure of a community's overall social and economic well-being and health. FICMR is a critical process in identifying health or social issues that our community has a responsibility to address, whether through policy change or education.

Since 1997, when the Montana Legislature passed a law encouraging the creation of multi-disciplinary teams to review fetal, infant, and child deaths, the Lewis and Clark County FICMMR team has reviewed dozens of them. The members have noticed a pattern: Several of these deaths involved infants who were sleeping in circumstances that may possibly have contributed to their sudden fate.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS, was responsible for 14% of infant deaths in Montana from 2010-2014. Could these deaths have been prevented? We'll never know, but our hearts go out to the families whose lives the syndrome has shattered.

Steps to Safer Sleep

To avoid future SIDS deaths, the local FICMMR team has a strong recommendation for parents, grandparents, babysitters, and other caretakers: take steps to provide the safest possible sleep environment for your little one. Here's how:

Always place your baby on its back to sleep, both at bedtime and naptime. This is the number one way you can reduce the risk of SIDS. When your baby gets old enough to turn over on its own, you don't need to reposition it.

Provide baby with a firm sleep surface, such as a mattress in a safety-approved crib, covered by a fitted sheet. Avoid soft sleep surfaces, like pillows, quilts, sheepskins, sofas, waterbeds, or air mattresses. These increase the risk of suffocation.

If you can't afford a safe crib, contact Lewis and Clark Public Health at 457-8900. We may be able to help you get one through the Safe Sleep for Baby Program sponsored by Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, the Montana Coalition.

Keep baby's sleep area close to, but separate from, yours. Sleeping in the same room as your baby reduces its risk of SIDS; health experts recommend it until your baby is at least six months old. But baby shouldn't sleep in the same bed with you or anyone else because of the risk of suffocation. The risk is even greater if you're a smoker, very tired (and what new parent isn't?), or under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or medications that make you sleepy.

Your baby should not sleep in an adult bed, on a couch, or on a chair alone, with you, or with anyone else. If co-sleeping is a traditional part of your culture, consider placing a cradle, bassinette, or bedside co-sleeper right next to your bed instead.

Keep pillows, blankets, crib bumpers, stuffed animals, and other soft objects out of the crib when baby is sleeping. Keep pets and other children away, too. Babies can suffocate if they press their face up against anything soft.

Dress baby in a sleeper instead of using blankets, again to avoid suffocation. Make sure nothing covers your baby's head.

Don't overdress your baby. Babies who get too warm during sleep might sleep too deeply and be unable to wake themselves up, which could play a role in SIDS. If the room temperature is comfortable for you, then it's comfortable for your baby.

Breastfeed your baby. Research shows that babies who are breastfed or fed with breast milk for the first six months of life are at lower risk of SIDS. If you like to bring baby to bed to breastfeed, put it back in its own bed when you're done.

Give your baby a dry pacifier that's not attached to a string for naps and bedtime.

Make sure no one smokes in your home or around your baby. Studies show that exposure to smoke is a health risk for your baby both before and after birth. It also has been identified as one of the greatest risk factors for SIDS. Even the smoke particles that settle on a smoker's clothes and hair can harm an infant's developing respiratory system.

Avoid products that claim to reduce the risk of SIDS and other sleep-related causes of infant death, including heart and breathing monitors. They have not been tested for safety and effectiveness.

Give your baby time on its tummy when it's awake and someone is watching. Tummy time helps your baby to improve motor skills; strengthen head, neck, and shoulder muscles; and prevent flat spots on the head.

Finally, make sure anyone and everyone who cares for your child is aware of these recommendations.

The local FICMR team would be delighted to have fewer reasons to get together.

More information

- About SIDS: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/sids/
- About crib safety guidelines: Consumer Product Safety Commission, 1-800-638-2772, www.cpsc.gov